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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 ASHGABAT 000433

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STATE FOR SCA/CEN, IO, DRL/IRF

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E.O. 12958: DECL: 04/07/2018

TAGS: PGOV PHUM KIRF TX

SUBJECT: TURKMENISTAN: UN SPECIAL RAPPORTEUR ON RELIGION
TO VISIT IN MID-SEPTEMBER

Classified By: CDA RICHARD E. HOAGLAND: 1.4 (B), (D).

¶1. (C) SUMMARY: The UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion will visit Turkmenistan in mid-September, according to OHCHR Regional Representative Matilda Bogner. The current revision of the law by a U.S. expert, funded by USAID, may provide an opportunity to bring the law up to international standards, since the upcoming visit may be part of the impetus for amending the law. Two Turkmen officials plan to travel to Geneva soon to observe the first session of the universal periodic review to prepare for Turkmenistan's turn in December. END SUMMARY.

¶2. (SBU) Regional Representative for the UN's Office of the High Commissioner for Human Rights (OHCHR) Matilda Bogner met April 7 with EmbOffs to discuss current cooperation with Turkmenistan. She said the UN Special Rapporteur on Freedom of Religion would visit in mid-September. Bogner wondered if current efforts to revise the law on religion are linked to the Special Rapporteur's visit.

INTERNATIONAL HUMAN RIGHTS CONVENTIONS

¶3. (C) Bogner said most of the UN's human rights work in Turkmenistan is geared toward getting the Turkmen to ratify UN Conventions and doing the obligatory reports. So far, the Turkmen have ratified the Conventions on Rights of the Child, Against Racial Discrimination, and on the Rights of Women. OHCHR is encouraging them to ratify the Conventions on Violence Against Women, on Social Rights (with an emphasis on housing), and on People with Disabilities. Bogner said they are promoting these three, because they believe this is achievable. In fact, the Institute for Democracy and Human Rights (IDHR) has already recommended that Turkmenistan adopt the Convention on People with Disabilities. She said the various conventions on torture are not high priority for OHCHR's work with Turkmenistan, because they believe their ratification would be much harder to achieve.

¶4. (C) Bogner said Turkmenistan's first Universal Periodic Review document is due in December, but two Turkmen officials will soon travel to Geneva to observe the upcoming periodic review of several other countries, so that they can better prepare for their own. Those officials will be Parliament Human Rights Issues Committee Chair Juma Jumayev and Head of IDHR's Democracy Department Shemshat Atajanova.

FUTURE PROJECTS

¶5. (SBU) As part of a three-year project, OHCHR, in conjunction with the EU, plans to open outreach/Internet centers around the country. They plan to start with five (one in each province), and then possibly increase that number. The strategy calls for working in partnership with college-level institutes in each place. Bogner said OHCHR, since it works through UNDP and currently has no permanent presence in Turkmenistan, is also considering options for establishing a presence here, possibly by hiring an implementer who can receive and address human rights complaints. Currently, complaints are received and handled in Bishkek, but OHCHR thinks having a presence here would enable it to respond more effectively.

¶6. (C) COMMENT: The visit of the special rapporteur is a major development, and a big step by the Turkmen, who, no doubt, realize that the rapporteur's report will turn up deficiencies. This could indeed be part of the impetus toward amending the law on religion. This presents a real opportunity to bring the law up to international standards, and thereby decrease the possible number of deficiencies in the report. A U.S. expert, funded by AID, is providing comments to the law. This may also provide an opportunity to

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address issues such as alternative service, since religious belief is often a reason for conscientious objection. Nevertheless, even if the law allows for much greater religious freedom, implementation will still likely be slow because of entrenched attitudes. END COMMENT.
HOAGLAND